

Washington's most popular afternoon radio talk show, had a two-hour call in. Chris Core supported the coach "110 percent." Only two callers dissented. The very next day, Coach Parry told me, he was called by the principal and told he was being reinstated.

So here's a case of a student who shows blatant disrespect for the symbol of our freedom and the American way of life, who places the tenure and career of an outstanding and highly successful coach in jeopardy, and walks away blameless. At the same time, Coach Parry was told that he was "too caustic," was suspended from his job for 12 days, and given a letter of reprimand.

Something's wrong here. The wrong guy has been punished. This is political correctness at its zaniest. Whatever happened to accountability and personal responsibility for one's own behavior? Instead of being portrayed as the villain, Coach Parry should be hailed as a patriot. Webster's dictionary defines a patriot as "one who loves his country and zealously supports its authority and interests." The coach did what you and I would have done under the same circumstances. Thomas Paine, in one of his most favorite quotes, said, "The summer soldier and the sunshine patriot will, in this crisis, shrink from the service of his country, but he that stands for it now, deserves the love and thanks of man and woman."

There's more to this story, as I found out in talking to Coach Parry. As I said earlier, the student used to be on the track team at school. He and the coach knew each other well. The student sometimes ate his lunch in the coach's office, used his microwave. Coach Parry even drove him home after track practice at times when he needed a ride. But the student had an attitude problem, and it came to the fore with his disrespect for the Pledge of Allegiance.

Where does Coach Parry derive his patriotic fervor? From his dad and his uncle who fought with the Marines on Iwo Jima, the bloodiest battle in World War II. His uncle was with the Third Marine Division. He landed on the beach at Iwo with 48 Marines in his platoon. When he left on a stretcher, 40 of the 48 Marines were killed. The remaining 8, including himself were wounded. Coach Parry's dad was with the Fourth Marine Division. After he learned that his brother was wounded, he visited him later aboard a hospital ship off Iwo.

And if that isn't proof enough of Coach Parry's patriotic heritage, I learned that his great-great-grandfather served in the American Revolutionary War as a sergeant in the First Maryland Regiment, and was wounded in battle in New Jersey while pulling down a British flag. What a legacy. I mention this family history only to put in perspective the total picture. The bottom line, as Coach Parry told me, is that "people do care—I'm testimony to that." He told me that he had just received in the mail an unsolicited musical tape of patriotic songs from a group called "Friends of America" from Fort Collins, Colorado. One of the songs was "I'm Proud to be an American." To that, I can only add, thank God that Coach Parry is an American. He's All-American, first team, in my opinion.

From this example of Coach Parry, it proves the point that coaches hold a unique place in the educational system of this country. They are not only teachers of young men and women, they are also their leaders. They test their spirit, and at the same time force them to test themselves. Coaches do as much to build the character of the future leaders of our country as any other group.

Let me tell you about another great coach—one who I regarded as the best coach in America—my high school coach at St. Agnes Home for Boys in Sparkill, New York,

one of the two orphanages where I was raised.

His name was Jim Faulk, an inspirational leader unsurpassed. When he was inducted into the Rockland County Sports Hall of Fame in 1978, the program citation read: "Jim Faulk not only was the coach, he was 'Mr. Everything' at St. Agnes. He did it all. He was the athletic director, the guidance counselor, the social worker, the disciplinarian, the trainer, the varsity and J.V. coach for all the sports, which included football, basketball, baseball, wrestling and golf. In his spare time he also ran a full sports program for the alumni. He even drove the school bus." In his acceptance speech, he said, "I made it only because of the gutsy kids I coached at St. Agnes." I know he said it because I was there.

Jim Faulk came to St. Agnes in 1933, fresh out of the University of Alabama. Through the years, he turned down lucrative offers from Villanova and other prestigious colleges to remain at a much lower salary with the orphan boys and kids from broken homes. He devoted his life to St. Agnes—and to the Dominican nuns there—helping needy youngsters advance through life.

He produced football teams so tough that few schools wanted to play him. One of the schools that accepted the challenge was St. Cecelia's High School in Englewood, New Jersey. Its young coach then, just out of Fordham, later went on to fame as head coach of the Green Bay Packers and the Washington Redskins—Vince Lombardi.

Coach Faulk tried to set up a game with the New York Military Academy, an exclusive prep school for West Point. They only played us when our coach had them flunking we were a fancy prep school like them—they thought we were St. Agnes Prep. Little did they know we were an orphanage with ragtag uniforms and sometimes borrowed equipment. Anyway, we established a relationship and ended up playing them for many years.

During World War II, Coach Faulk took a leave of absence from St. Agnes to join the Marines. He was a Captain in command of artillery units and saw extensive combat in the Pacific, including action at Guadalcanal. He remained in the Marine Corps Reserve in later life and retired as a full colonel.

He wrote many inspiring letters from his combat assignments during the war that were reprinted in a newsletter sent out by the nuns to St. Agnes men serving in the military around the globe. He always addressed his letters "To the Fightingest Boys in the World." In one of his letters, as he was aboard ship and waiting to go over the side, he wrote:

"There is absolutely no group of men in this wide world as loyal and devoted to its alma mater and to each other as you fighting boys from St. Agnes. No doubt, as you move from place to place in your travels to all continents and mingle with men from all states and nations, you must begin to appreciate more and more that spirit of St. Agnes—the spirit that is so much a part of your daily lives.

"No one but a St. Agnes boy could understand that deep loyalty and respect you have for each other. Stick together in war as you did in peace. Let the Sisters back home know where you are and what you are doing. Whether a private or a captain, you all speak the same language; you all have the same ideals and you are all heroes in my book. The Sisters feel likewise. They are bursting with pride and joy over your accomplishments."

That's the type of man Coach Jim Faulk was—always caring, inspiring, encouraging and motivating St. Agnes men to excel and achieve. And many St. Agnes graduates heard his message and followed in his footsteps. Let me mention some of them.

St. Agnes had as many as 600 kids fighting in World War II. Over 40 were killed, hundreds were wounded, and many were decorated for bravery. Guys like: Charlie Loesch, who lost his leg in the muddy mountains of sunny Italy. (His reaction: "when I get my artificial leg, everything will be just the same as when I had two genuine legs"); 1st Lt. A.J. Fabrizi, who completed 50 bombing missions over enemy territory with the 15th Air Force in Italy; Francis Mahon, who went back to Walter Reed Hospital for the third operation to save his eye; the mother of Bill Callahan wrote to let us know her son was a P.O.W. His address then was Stalag 17 B, Germany; Frank Napoli paratrooper, won the Silver Star and the Purple Heart after major landings in Sicily and Salerno, Italy; Sam Torresse who Coach Faulk wrote to and said, "I was sorry to hear about your wounds . . . it will take more than a Nazi to flatten you"; Jim Nestor—Coach Faulk talked to other Marines who were with him when he gave his life on a ridge in the Marianas "trying to prevent a breakthrough of fanatic, drunken Nips"; and Captain David Loeser, Army, killed in action in Luxembourg, the first St. Agnes kid to attain the rank of Captain.

I could go on and on, but as Coach Faulk said, these were gutsy kids, and true heroes they were. They were my legacy, they are yours, and they are America's.

Literally hundreds and hundreds of St. Agnes men, including two brothers and myself, joined the Marine Corps, inspired by the example set by Coach Faulk. I had two other brothers join the Navy. Coach Faulk was, in my opinion, probably the greatest unofficial recruiter the Marine Corps ever had.

Jim and his wife Betty were never blessed with children. We took care of that. Some of us named our children after him. My oldest son is named James Faulk Merna. Coach Faulk was very proud of his namesake and visited him with much pride when he was a midshipman at the U.S. Naval Academy. Our son graduated with the Class of 1987, is married with two children, and is a lawyer with the most prominent law firm in Atlanta.

Coach Faulk once told me in a letter, while I was in Korea during that war, "One character trait that I admired in all of you St. Agnes men—you went out into the world with two strikes on you, and never expected to be embraced, gave your all for your country when it asked, and, now, most of you are raising families who can truly say—my father came up the hard way."

Now you can see why I said earlier that someone like Coach Faulk was the greatest coach that I have ever known. Our nation needs strong coaches like Coach Faulk, Coach Parry, and Ben Wright, because they are doing as much to build the character of our future leaders as any other group of men or women.

One last final thought. Our nation is in the midst of a huge nostalgia fest with the Second World War. A number of "Greatest Generation" books have been written, the best by Tom Brokaw of NBC News, box-office attendance records have been set for the new blockbuster movies like "Saving Private Ryan" and now "Pearl Harbor." There has also been significant publicity about the World War II Memorial now finally approved for the Mall in Washington, D.C.

Let us build on this momentum. We have elections coming up next year, and another Presidential election in 2004. As George Will pointed out recently, during the last administration, at times, we had a president, a CIA director, a Secretary of Defense, a Secretary of State, and a National Security Advisor, none of whom had any military experience. It's almost as appalling in the Congress. According to the National Association for Uniformed Services, in 1965, 82% of the members